

Two beetles

Camille stopped at the top of the rise that drew back from the rock-strewn sandy beach. She stood there several long minutes, silent and nervous, seemingly unmoved by the wind and an incoming bank of dark clouds, looking seaward toward the Southern Ocean.

In the unrelenting wind off the sea, her pale green lightweight linen dress flapped vigorously around her slender white legs. Her light-grey knitted cotton cardi too, unbuttoned and somewhat misshapen already despite being new, kept pulling open across her thin right shoulder. This struggle continued no matter how often Camille retrieved the arm of the cardi, until she at last gave up, and left her bony shoulder to chill a while in the late sun, with the corner of her nylon scarf tugging and tapping at her skin. Feeling melancholy and annoyed by the wind, she'd already told herself earlier that it was too warm a day to actually do the thing up. But at length she relented, and brusquely shoved the small clear plastic buttons through their row of buttonholes, then stood with her arms hugged around her own waist a moment. This was a gesture of taking comfort, before she pushed both hands deep into the side pockets in her dress for a little warmth.

Aside of the phone call from her daughter, Camille's 59th birthday had come and gone uneventfully. She held herself up emotionally through knowing her son would no doubt make it out to visit her soon, from Melbourne, one of these days. He was 'a bit slack' lately about staying in contact. For a moment she was overtaken by a sense once again that she should have had more children. It felt like a hole in her life that could never be filled, an incomplete part that could never be finished.

She was unsure why life had pulled her away from motherhood so quickly as it did, throwing her reluctantly into high-school teaching work too soon after the two babies came along, in her early thirties. She'd only had about five really good years altogether, to spend at home with them. It was something she regretted in hindsight, having not made the decision to forgo the better income for longer, in exchange for more 'baby time'. It had just seemed to make sense, to be important, to be earning money at that time when they'd wanted to buy their first suburban home, and then later their next home, in a rural town.

The teaching followed a degree she'd gone back for in her late twenties, after failing to 'make it' in her dream job as a writer with an Arts degree in literature. It had been casual shifts at first, but then preoccupied her full-time for several years, all up a bit more than a decade in total.

Then she'd found herself suddenly and unexpectedly retrenched, in her mid-forties, as one of the many unlucky ones 'booted out' due to streamlining of the school system, and the introduction of online courses and self-directed learning for some of the students. Younger teachers these days had better expertise in information technology of course, and internet-based learning platforms, web-building, and new software, all that kind of thing, as well as masters degrees, many of them. Even high-tech mobile phones remained a mystery to Camille, whose main field of interest, classic literature, was no longer a major study focus in Australian schools.

Since losing her long-term job, she had spent the ensuing fifteen years taking casual relief teaching roles, interspersed by occasional short-term contracts. That was okay at first in conjunction with her husband's income, and when the kids were in high-school themselves. Since the separation however, almost ten years ago, her meager earnings were supplemented only by an unemployment benefit.

‘Newstart’ they called it now. Paid at a ‘survival’ rate, it was barely enough to pay the mortgage, which thankfully was mainly paid off by now, and stayed low in any case compared to rents these days. So she did have just a bit of wiggle room to rearrange her spending at least sometimes to suit herself.

Despite that, she didn’t ever manage to save enough to have extra money put aside for later. And even in those few years without a hubby, with her kids still at home, as teenage school students, then later as tertiary enrollees, she’d gained a fearful insight into the level of financial hardship borne by sole parents. It was a constant struggle for them to afford anything.

Camille’s home of late was in the country town of Ballarat, living alone in a humble worker’s cottage that was purchased together with her Russian-born ex-husband Alexeis, after their move from Melbourne when he changed jobs. It was lucky, she mused, that she wasn’t into some kind of middle class ‘lifestyle’, or she would never have been able to be happy on her limited income. Nevertheless, she wanted a ‘weekend holiday’ at the beach for a few days, just for a break. She’d taken the morning bus, with just one carry-on bag, and arrived after lunch at the local tourist information stop in a small beachside town on the south coast. It was a short walk to the hostel, where she was sharing a room, as it turned out, with a very talkative and welcoming South Australian woman.

In the afternoon, Camille set out from the hostel on foot, and soon found herself out on a headland in a place with very few visitors, musing that she always seemed to be doing everything alone. She’d followed the foot-bridge across to the island. Her light grey-blond hair looked a mess, she knew, so it was lucky to be in a place with no-one to stare at her. The salty ends of it were now careening about her

face with the changeability of the gusty sea breeze, irritating her cheeks and sticking in the corners of her mouth and eyes, almost uncontrollable, and still too short to collect into a bun. She had grown tired of her bob cut lately, and wanted to let her hair get much longer, so she would be able to wear a plait like she'd done when she was young. She was well enough aware that this was definitely not trendy for a woman her age, and that it wouldn't help her get more work. But that was not on the cards these days anyway.

And why did they have such a long gap now between 'end of work' and 'actual retirement', she wondered, for people in her shoes? She couldn't imagine what the next five or six years would demand of her before she would be allowed to apply for a retiree's pension payment. And Alexeis was no help these days.

Almost without realising, Camille murmured, 'Thank God', under her breath, contemplating what life might have been like if her 'ex' hadn't let her keep the Ballarat house. He'd always had so much better-paid work than her, as a bathroom tiler, although his knees had been playing up recently as he got older. Around the time they'd separated, he returned to the western suburbs for more work, where the development of housing estates in new suburbs was truly booming. Some few real estate investors were making huge fortunes, that much was clear.

But the break-up with Alexeis, over ten years ago now, had eventually left their friendship strained to a point beyond repair. She knew too much about how he and some of his rougher drinking buddies spent their pay. It wasn't nice.

And she'd grown lonely too since the kids had grown up and left, after they finished university. Her son had left six years ago, aged 22, and her daughter left three years ago aged 23. She'd only really become used to it for the past few months.

This was the first break away from home Camille had allowed herself to afford for over a year. She knew well that Australia was sure a 'lucky country', against her early memories of eastern Europe. But she wasn't so sure that enough luck was being extended to older women, especially those who no longer had family members left at home to justify the respect that might be accorded them by others.

Camille tried not to appear anxious at the approach of another walker on the trail, a younger woman in a bright pink shirt. She'd deliberately chosen to stand here, in this most isolated part of the island, hoping to have some time 'away from civilisation', or 'in the midst of nature', as she imagined it. There were made paths here of course, and built rock piers, historic ruins, signposts, and some boardwalks and seats even. Yet few people made their way this far out onto the headland and over the bridge to the island, unless the weather was much milder and warmer than it was on this particular Thursday evening.

The younger woman walked past swiftly on the sandy track close to where Camille was standing, without speaking. Instead of greeting her, Camille maintained her fixed gaze on the ocean, pretending an insurmountable interest in the small island she could see towards the horizon. She was still nervous of strangers, as she realised, and hoped it wasn't obvious in the intimate space of the island air. She would have intended to be supportive of a younger person, and to be friendly and welcoming to a fellow walker. But it wasn't to be helped. Ever since she'd arrived here as a child, she'd been shy, and she remembered literally hiding behind her mother's coloured skirt when meeting a stranger. They had emigrated to Australia from the Ukraine, after carefully saving every penny, and with help from family members and a funded

scheme. When they arrived here they had not much more than they could carry in a few small bags.

Australia could be such a funny country though, Camille mused, in that communities remained quite disconnected on the whole. Her mother had missed her girlfriends terribly, and the type of community work, in gardens and small farms, that she had previously taken part in, together with them. And Australians all thought of themselves as middle class or upper middle class, and placed so much value in their new possessions.

Yet there was such glaring poverty still left in some places, where people struggled with a huge socio-economic disadvantage, as she had seen in the western suburbs in earlier years, and in Ballarat later on, during her teaching years, although it was slowly improving. Camille estimated there might be almost thirty to forty percent of the Australian population, at least in outer regions, who often lived in poverty, with incomes below or not much above the poverty line. Maybe she had just encountered this more than she otherwise would have, by working in low-income areas and rural high-schools.

She recalled how lucky she'd been in not having had a husband who was overtly violent to her, and acknowledged that he had stuck around long enough to support her and the kids for most of the years they were in primary and high school. Some of the sole parents she'd met while teaching were really doing it tough. She knew she would have really struggled to be living that poor herself.

And yet there was a sense about that group that at least they could kind of band together, and not be so aloof from one another, as the community in general appeared to be. She wondered if this was because they were free of that expectation of how completely they felt they'd have to present themselves to others, as being well

off, and 'having' enough, of new possessions, paying private fees for their kids to attend a good school, and living in a nice home with all the modern appliances, and so on. The single mums couldn't afford all that, so they just stopped worrying about the façade and just got on with life, she thought.

Returning to the present moment, Camille bent forward and removed her sandals. Holding both heel straps in her left hand, she stepped slowly down through the bushes growing on the dune in front of her. Gratefully feeling the sand give way under her feet and between her toes, she walked down onto the beach.

Two beetles were there, stuck on the sand of the beach, and it seemed so strange that their aura of distress was obvious to her, when no-one else might have noticed them. They were in her path effectively, and so she felt unavoidably bound to pick them up. They must have been blown off their course somehow by the especially strong wind last night.

The first one was a green and shiny Christmas beetle, suited to the coming holiday season, and the next was a black and large weevil with corrugated wings and fancy feathered antennae.

Carefully, Camille took off her scarf and carted these beetles, entwined into twists in different corners of it, further along the beach to the return track, then up the sand dune to the scrubby bushes that grew there, and deposited them. The weevil she left at the foot of a juvenile red-flowered west Australian eucalypt in bud, knowing it would be reasonably sheltered, but hoping it wouldn't be consumed by the resident ants that trailed across the foot of the tree. The Christmas beetle she placed gently into a succulent low-growing bush with dark purple berries. Whether these locations would make any difference to their chances of survival she had no idea.

Camille then continued on with her walk back to the hostel. She realised she was finally okay about her own company most of the time lately. This had changed especially since that last big argument with Alexei, a couple of years ago. It was then she'd decided she no longer wanted ever again to mention to him the possibility of getting back together with him.

Instead she was thinking lately about Timur, who she'd bumped into again in the local café up the street from home the other Saturday. He'd happened upon her and embarrassed her in the middle of buying a latte!

After some years of attempts to salvage the tattered ends of her marriage, Camille had lately decided, probably this morning in fact, that Tim was to be her new crush, although she didn't actually expect anything to come of it. She certainly wouldn't be chasing him up, and phoning him up, and all that. But in a way, she knew she just couldn't get him out of her mind. Maybe she would run into him again in town? Playing with the idea, she wondered if she'd be timid next time she met Timur. At least hopefully not embarrassed like that other time!

Tim was of Russian heritage, like herself and Alexei, which mattered somehow. And anyway, he was so mild-looking, as if constantly half-amused by life, and she liked the way he looked directly at her. When he smiled, his smile creased up one side of his face before pulling his mouth right up, and his eyes stayed nice and calm, deep brown, and so unflinching when they looked at you, she thought, as if he was someone who'd always concede your point of view, and make a deep attempt at understanding. He was a library assistant, in the Ballarat library, which is where she'd met him.

Back at home, the following week, Camille was pleased to open her email and find she'd been offered a new short-term job helping one of her old teacher friends with a research project about poverty in Australia. Apparently, they believed that a high quality of educational experience could go a long way to alleviating the impacts of poverty, and research about this helped to attract better funding for schools. Would she be able to do some reading, and work up a concise 'literature review' to help her friend's research?

In the evening, she opened the first of a group of readings about poverty, on her computer desktop. She was jealous reading the literature review for this paper, because it was very good. Nonetheless, she felt glad she didn't have to write such a detailed version of it herself. The information presented about the historic evolution of ideas was excellent, compelling in fact, and encouraged understanding of poverty experiences being so entrenched, while the statistical information about poverty in Australia was comprehensive and interesting, with a specificity for contemporary issues of social welfare. But Camille felt she wanted to write something more emotive and personal in effect. It should describe the actual lived experiences of poverty she had witnessed among some of her students and their families, and the circumstances and feelings of real people who'd found themselves confronted with this situation, as her own parents had when she was a young girl.

In the next week, Camille buried herself in reading and summarising papers every day, until she understood as much as she was able. Some of the more recent authors writing on poverty included international names like Amartya Sen and others, who encapsulated in their writing new ideas about poverty being multidimensional, and so it included not only income but factors such as 'freedom', or an ability to choose

one's activities. Ultimately, these authors built from this basic idea something of a theory about 'freedom poverty', which transposed understandings about contemporary poverty based on income, into understandings about contemporary poverty based on limitations to freedom. They mainly emphasised three aspects, of income, health, and education.

Camille realised, however, that in doing this, they had possibly oversimplified the idea of poverty being a thing that was built from these component factors being inadequately supplied, and which therefore people could remove easily, hypothetically, by simply addressing the lack of these three factors. She set about writing her literature review in the form of a response to this, and included short examples of the lives of poor people she had met.

In actuality, Camille believed many of the poorest people she'd met would never have a chance to improve their education standard significantly, perhaps due to them not having an aptitude for study, or a financial opportunity to quit work for a long enough time to study, due to family responsibilities. Many would never be able to improve their lot in terms of health due to disability or long-term health problems, such as mental illness or painful physical disease, which complicated their lives for years up to decades.

Also, some people who theoretically would be able to improve their lives were stuck in a rut anyway, due to not attempting to visualise themselves and their lives as able to be changed (and perhaps often enough by not wanting to change, or not thinking of change as worthwhile), and so perhaps feeling relatively content with their circumstances and 'lot in life', and not comprehending how any substantial change could be beneficial. Some of them were just thoroughly tired, after many years of struggle and raising a family in poverty.

Camille contemplated especially how the authors of one paper referred to employment income as if it was inherently emancipatory, because it is shown to contribute to better health, in quantitative studies. She knew however that actually, for some people, a lowish employment income can be what keeps them relatively ‘unfree’ or even ‘poor’. Due to their culture, these people often spend their earnings on a certain lifestyle, and may be left with very little to show for all their hard work. A person’s devotion to employment, which sure enough can pay them just enough to afford their mortgage, and buy food, alcohol and smokes, and keep their car running – which admittedly is likely more than a poorer person on welfare could afford – nevertheless profoundly hampers them from being able to improve their life through participation in the educational system, or health-directed activities.

Also for these people, Camille realised, along with their idea of not wanting to change, or of already having the best circumstances they could hope to get, low income working folks have a lifestyle that revolves around work, with little spare time to relax and experience a certain freedom of ‘time’. They would usually not be exposed, at least for many years, to genuine hardship-level poverty, and to living with social service provision of a kind that gives first-hand experience of what life is like for the more genuinely poor people, but they might have some other difficult situation such as a husband who drives whereas the wife can never afford a vehicle. The husband may have a heart condition but he still perseveres in smoking, as a cultural thing, until he dies young, leaving his wife ultimately very poor.

Also strangely, this working group may never have the option that some poorer people do find to develop their sense of their own chosen direction ‘in life’ rather than ‘in work’, mainly through their participation in aspects of the educational

system, but also through involvement in community networks through activities that take place during daylight (working) hours.

Eventually Camille decided that the idea of ‘freedom poverty’ seems to relate more to a low to middle-class group, who have become unable to visualise any change for whatever reason. It didn’t appear to relate to those in abject poverty, or some who live well below the poverty line, but who also lack health and education, because there simply has never been any chance for them to gain any increased degree of personal freedom through improving either their health or their education.

She decided the term ‘freedom poverty’ was misleading, and that it might be better suited to a situation where people were somehow able to effect some types of changes and make their lives less ‘poor’, by having greater freedoms and improved health, whether or not they could increase their income. Good home cooking to improve health, or the use of old fashioned herbs of the kind Camille’s mother had relied on appeared to her to be a good example of something that is available to these people. But these things may not even be evident at all as a choice to those who lived in greater poverty (or were more entrenched in a defined working-class mindset). This is because such people, in Australia, often wouldn’t imagine it could be helpful, for instance to eat healthier foods or use ‘home medicine’, and they usually wouldn’t look for ways to access or produce ‘health food’ or home-grown cures any time when they couldn’t afford it through conventional avenues.

Camille summarised her literature review by stating that she felt Australian people were often too philosophically ‘straight’ to think laterally or around a corner. Why should everyone always be wealthy, to expect a good life quality? Weren’t there other aspects of life that made choices available to people that amounted to freedom? But what was the point in trying to explain this, she wondered, when so many

Australian people, and maybe people all over the world, only hankered to be middle-class, and to constantly spend a lot of money, as their primary defining value system?

Camille sat at the round kitchen table and drew up a careful budget for the next few months. The extra pay for the research summary would help with household repairs like getting her old fence painted. But she was going to have to be very careful with her spending for weeks at a time now, mainly only living on the Newstart payment. Luckily her friend was running a community choir, and participants could attend rehearsals for a gold coin donation each week.

She stood up and stretched quickly when the phone rang. It was her son, who was sorry to have not phoned her lately, and was heading out to stay the following weekend. A smile ran quickly across Camille's face by the time she hung up, and it stayed with her as she brought in the load of washing from the rack on the back verandah, singing quietly some tune she remembered from long ago.

But it vanished quickly when she realised a man was standing on her front porch, visible through the patterned lace curtains of the living room, his outline dark against the light of the late afternoon sun. It was Timur! She panicked momentarily thinking how she might let him know how much she liked him, but avoid revealing to him the detail of her emotions and exactly what she had been thinking about him?

The doorbell rang.